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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether the familiarity and competence that many African American students have with elements of rap music and culture could be used as a bridge to the production of other literate texts. Two high-school English teachers, one teaching at Fremont High School, East Oakland and the other teaching at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California, were selected. Curriculum materials included newspaper and magazine articles, short stories, visual materials, audio materials, and audio-visual materials. Instruction was conducted 2 days per week for the 12-week duration of the project. Data included classroom observations and initial and final writing prompts. Results of analysis of the writing prompts were inconclusive. Results also indicated that (1) many students exhibited significant competence in both the oral and written production of rap texts; (2) teachers continually reported that students who had a history of apathy and minimal participation came alive when presented with the intervention curriculum; (3) many of the most commercially successful rap artists are highly proficient in (and perform much of their music in) language that is very close to edited English; (4) one of the teachers began to feel that her students did not accept her teaching them about rap music and culture; and (5) the curriculum materials had an ephemeral shelf life. (Contains 31 references, and 3 charts of data. Attachments provide more data.) (RS)

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FINAL REPORT

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND YOUTH CULTURE AS A BRIDGE TO WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Jabari Mahiri

University of California at Berkeley

February, 1996

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African American and Youth Culture as a Bridge to Writing Development

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INTRODUCTION

There is a pressing need for researchers to assist teachers in finding or developing viable ways to utilize the knowledge and competencies that students bring to the classroom in the service of learning and literacy. The significance of this need has been continuously addressed in the formulations of process writing instruction (Applebee, 1984; Atwell 1987; Calkins, 1986), in the rationales for multiculturalism and culturally sensitive instruction (Franklin, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Nieto, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1987), and in the theories of critical pedagogy (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Giroux, 1988; Grossberg, 1986). Though instructional strategies are emerging that are sensitive to ethnic diversity, they often do not address specific ways of incorporating African American youth culture into the curriculum and, therefore, are not able to assess its potential for enhancing learning and literacy (Cummins, 1984; Poplin, 1988; Tharp, 1989).

One line of research suggests that African American culture itself is oppositional to the culture of schools. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu argued that African American students associated school knowledge and official school culture with "acting white" and saw this in violation to their identification with fictive kinship norms (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). They further argued that this

oppositional nature was relatively fixed, based on a historically structured and enforced "castelike" position of subordination and perceived conflicts between the norms of their fictive kinship system and their sense of the value and values of schools and the larger society.

Bracha Alpert, on the other hand, studied student resistance behaviors but concluded that the likelihood of student resistance was linked to the teaching approach. He found that resistance was more likely when the emphasis was primarily on academic subject matter knowledge in the classroom, and acceptance was more likely when students' personal knowledge was incorporated into instruction in conjunction with a responsive style of classroom discourse (Alpert, 1991). This formulation allows for more flexibility in the motives for resistance by suggesting that students' responses of either resistance or acceptance are at least in part predicated on the specific nature of pedagogy and curriculum to which they are exposed. From this perspective, student resistance to school culture can be a focal point for developing ways to change school culture so that it serves their lives and learning.

Despite the current focus on multiculturalism, the reality of many African American students, especially in the nation's urban public schools, is that they are in classroom settings that are overwhelmingly populated by other African American students. Like students from other cultural groups, African American students are often struggling with complex issues of identity and self representation as part of the scary, experimental passage from youth to adulthood. They avidly seek out, defiantly try on, and routinely discard a variety of new identities in pursuit of self discovery and self affirmation. Yet, the systematic absence of representation or the calculated misrepresentation of culturally relevant issues and images for these students in school works to stifle their abilities and desires to authentically define and understand themselves.

Elizabeth Ellsworth noted that curriculums and teaching practices themselves need to be understood as acts of representation, that 'Teachers and educational institutions interpret and structure meanings into curriculums, and they mediate and produce official school knowledge through language, stories, images, music, and other cultural products" (Ellsworth, 1994: 100). Textbooks are the repositories that educators draw on to interpret and structure these meanings and are thereby the main sources of school knowledge. In their study of textbooks, Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant concluded that they presented a highly selective view of social reality, give students the idea that knowledge is static rather than dynamic, and encourage students to master isolated facts rather than to develop complex understandings of social reality (1991). The potential for building on authentic cultural and linguistic interests and competencies to motivate learning, by and large, is not accessible when the cycle of teaching and learning remains locked in a literature loop of textbook and canonical text representations.

In a study of vernacular writing of Philadelphia high school students, Miriam Camitta developed a curriculum around music, sports, and fashion. In an earlier community ethnography, she had identified these as three of the major areas that organized African American adolescent culture. She and her teacher/collaborators then sought to implement the findings of their community ethnography by making adjustments to the standard language arts curriculum -- organizing it around the themes of music, fashion, and sports in an attempt to circumvent some of the 'discontinuity' between the culture of school and that of community. In so doing they met with some success in increasing their students' motivation to write.

In fact, a body of research is emerging that documents successful strategies for incorporating and building upon some aspects of African American

culture to facilitate learning and literacy development in school settings (Brooks, 1985; Delain et al., 1985; Delpit, 1990; Gee, 1989; Heath & Branscombe, 1985; Lee, 1991, 1993; Ortony et al., 1985; Mahiri and Mitchell Forthcoming 1996). The work of Carol Lee, for example, demonstrated a strategy for using signifying structures in African American language to effect a pedagogical scaffolding that helped African American high school students develop skills of literary analysis. Lee felt argued that the pedagogical potential of the way "culture and cognition co-construct one another....can be viewed in Vygotskian terms as the cross-fertilization of scientific and spontaneous concepts" (1991:293). She further noted that research has provided "meaningful insights into the texture and nuances of the interplay of culture and cognition....[but suggested] What is missing...in terms of enriching the links between everyday practice and schooling are specific descriptions of the knowledge structures taught in school as they relate to the knowledge structures constructed within nonschool social settings" (1991:292-293). Her strategies for using signifying and other rhetorical devices that characterized what Zora Neal Hurston termed "speakerly" texts in literature were successful in linking the oral talk of African American students to literary language and critique.

Similarly, central questions for the research project of this report were to what extent could the familiarity and competence that many African American students have with elements of rap music and culture also be used as a bridge to the production of other literate texts? Could rap music with its powerfully influential oral, lyrical, visual, and written components be effectively transported from streets to schools? Could its thematic content, critical perspectives and electric presentational styles be used to jump-start some students out of their apathy toward writing and learning? Were there connections between the strategies for its production and the production of other texts? Could students

become producers of texts in schools drawing on the capital of these lives and popular cultural experiences?

Rap music clearly has pervasive effects in the lives of many African American youth. According to Catherine Powell:

> [Rap]... emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods as a genuine reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban Black youth in this, the last quarter of the 20th century....rap is part of a tradition or oral recitation that originated in Africa many centuries ago. This tradition is exemplified by the West African griot, or troubadour/storyteller. To the accompaniment of drums or other percussive instruments, griots entertain and educate their audiences by reciting tribal history and current events (1991: 246-247).

Its contemporary effects are revealed in styles of talk, dress, and dance, but also in youth consciousness. Interestingly, the attraction of rap cuts across all African American social classes. It is clear too that rap music and hip hop culture[1] have a significant impact on many youths who are not African American.

But rap music's legitimacy in society not to mention in schools has been continually challenged by powerful societal institutions, especially the mass media. For example, based on an analysis of all the articles about rap that appeared in the three most widely circulated news magazines in the United States and Canada (*Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News*) during the decade from 1983 to 1992, Julia Koza made a compelling case that the vast majority of these articles "reinforced a link between rap and specific negative themes" (1994: 183). She further noted that the significance of these magazines' negative representations of rap should be seen in the light of theories "that negativity is a strategy of

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[1] "Rap" and "hip-hop" are sometimes used interchangeably. "Rap" refers more specifically to the style of music itself "that entails talking, or 'rapping,' to a rhythmic musical background" according to Catherine Powell in "Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street." *Journal of Negro Education*, 60.3 (1991): 245. The term "hip-hop" also includes the cultural styles, images, attitudes, and products that surround and are often subjects of rap music.

containment that tends to reinforce dominant ideologies" (1994:184). Tricia Rose has further argued that strategies of containment associated with rap music and culture extend even into physical spaces. In addition to other issues raised in work, she illustrated how policies of containment get reflected in stringent permit procedures and other obstacles of access to the venues in which rap concerts and associated events take place (1991, 1994).

Clearly the issues and images surrounding rap music and hip hop culture are highly charged both socially and politically. In initiating this research project we understood that our efforts to capture and represent this particular aspect of students' lived experiences in the formal contexts of schools posed variegated problems for both teaching and learning. Of special concern was the use by some of its artists of explicit language and the incorporation of images that denigrated women in particular. Yet, we felt is was important to take up the challenge that Houston Baker put forth in his recent book *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (1993). He argued that it was the responsibility of scholars to study and critically assess these new and pervasive forms of urban youth expression represented in and by rap music and culture.

Our project extended this challenge into the area of literacy development. It provided a novel, provocative way to explore some of the most perplexing issues in literacy studies surrounding relationships between oral and written language. We examined whether motivation and facility in one form, in this case oral language, could be built upon to enhance motivation and facility with the other--written language. In so doing we took extreme care to work with the school and the focal teachers to insure the appropriateness the cultural texts, images, and sounds that were selected for study and use in the project's intervention.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project's investigation of how elements of African American and youth culture could be used in schools to help students further develop their abilities to write and think critically took place in five stages. Two capable graduate student research assistants, Soraya Sablo and Kendra Jones, worked with the project in through its completion. In the first stage we selected the two focal teachers and the two high school sites and began collecting potential curriculum materials with a particular emphasis on positive materials associated with rap music and culture. Working with these focal teachers in the second stage, we completed the collection and evaluation of the potential curriculum materials and worked out writing assessment strategies. Also, we ran a mini-trial intervention in a writing class at the university to get initial feedback on the use of some of these materials in a classroom setting. In the third stage we continued work with the two focal teachers to develop the actual curriculum used in the intervention. The forth stage was the running and collecting of data on the curriculum intervention itself. And, the fifth stage involved analysis of the data from the intervention.

A key hypothesis of the project was that the knowledge base and motivation youths had with the self-referential structures and patterns in oral rap texts could serve as heuristics for them to explore and make explicit the critique/argumentative and/or the descriptive/narrative strategies in the comparable written rap texts and ultimately in a variety of literate texts. Our general findings which will be detailed in a later section of this report were that students were highly motivated by the content of the intervention, and that the majority of students did show improvement their writing.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

* What are the levels and kinds of adaptive or spontaneously developed competence that African American high school students have related to aspects of rap music and culture?

* Do these competencies differ based on gender considerations?

* What are the rhetorical correspondences between rap texts and and other popular cultural texts, and the conventions of edited English texts?

* What are the most viable sources and contents for curriculum materials that more authentically represent these students' cultural experiences, and does their use transform apathy toward writing and learning in school?

* What instructional strategies are needed to link students' natural or developed competence with rap texts and other popular cultural material to the generation of texts that reflect the conventions of edited English?

Teacher and Site Selections

We interviewed eight prospective teachers in Oakland high schools whose students were predominately African American to assess the most viable teachers to work with the intervention. The project was to take place entirely in schools in Oakland, but we became aware of the work and school setting of several teachers at Berkeley high school who we also interviewed for the project. We felt that interesting contrastive issues might emerge in the Berkeley site which had significantly higher achievement scores. Given that the emphasis of the project was on writing development, only English teachers were considered, and we also wanted teachers with upper division classes because of the nature of the cultural intervention.

The first site selected was Fremont High School. Located in East Oakland, California, the school has an enrollment of approximately 1500 students. Forty-two percent of the student body is African American, 42% Chicano/Latino , 15% Asian, and 1% other. The school has a 62 teachers, 42% African American, 16% Chicano/Latino, 34% white, 3% Asian, 2% Native American and 3% other. Seventy-nine percent of the student body receive AFDC and 43% receive free/reduced lunch. The school fell significantly below the fiftieth percentile on the reading, language and mathematics sections of the CTBS and well over 100 points below the national average on the SAT. The focal teacher selected at this site was Mary Murray. Ms. Murray has over 25 years of teaching experience at Fremont and was serving as chair of its English Department. She was also working on a doctoral degree in Multicutural Education and Curriculum Development at the University of San Francisco.

The other site selected was Berkeley high school in Berkeley, California. It has a diverse enrollment of 2,160 students. Approximately 40% of the student body is African American, 30% white, 10% Asian, 10% Latino and 10% other. The average SAT score was 50 points above the national average on the verbal section and 75 points above the national average on the math section in 1994. The staff consists of 140 classroom teachers, 12 special education teachers and seven counselors. Despite these statistics, however, many African American and Latino students are not achieving academically and many never graduate. For example, as recent as three years ago, 68% of all the African American students who started at this school in the ninth grade did not finish there. Since then, the school has embarked on an ambitious program to de-track all of its English classes and eventually other classes as well as a key way to more equitably serve its students. Yet, far too many African American and Latino students continue to

drop out, and "D" and "F" rates in ninth grade have become reliable predictors of which students specifically are most at-risk.

Marie Roberts was our focal teacher at Berkeley high school. Ms. Roberts has been an English teacher in Bay area public schools for six years and holds a master's degree in Education and Technology from the San Francisco State. She brought an extensive knowledge of African American youth culture to the project along with a background in technology and media studies. Both Ms. Roberts and Ms. Murray had already experimented with the use of African American youth cultural materials in their classes. Finally, each of the two graduate students researchers was linked with one of the sites and focal teachers--Kendra Jones with Ms. Roberts at Berkeley and Soraya Sablo with Ms. Murray at Fremont--as the primary site managers.

Curriculum Materials

Student responses on questionnaires along with other background research led to a number of provocative sources for more authentic descriptions and critiques of issues in rap music and culture as well as youth culture generally. It quickly became clear how important it was to go well beyond the many pieces of academic research, commercial research, and articles in mass media in order to comprehend the rapid movement and mutations of this culture. Magazines like *Vibe,* and *The Source,* and *Details* became key sources for understanding this exploding cultural phenomenon. So much has been written about the artists, issues, aesthetics, performances, etc. of rap music and culture, that we found it entirely possible to base the whole intervention on this overwhelming body of text-based material without ever engaging actual rap songs and videos in the classes. This was not consistent, however, with the project's intent to explore possible links between oral and written texts, but it suggested that despite the extent to which rap cultural experiences have been

oral and written texts, but it suggested that despite the extent to which rap cultural experiences have been textualized, students rarely experienced these texts in the official curriculum of school. [Attachments 1, 2, and 3 of the "Interim Report" contains extensive samples of these materials.]

Six expansive binders of curriculum materials were made, two for each focal teacher and two for our research office. We also created a mini-library of multi-media and cultural texts for curriculum use that included music videos, PBS documentaries, network news clips, HBO television specials, popular movies, and videos of commercials all focused on rap music and culture. A number of themes and issues emerged that we decided should be focal points in the curriculum. Several of the key issues and themes were: identity and self definition; values and beliefs; issues of language, style, and dress; the cultural characterizations of African American males and females; censorship and related themes of freedom, power, and voice; relationships (friends, family, male/female); violence and its causes and consequences; and roles and influences of the media in cultural production. The materials used in the curriculum were categorized in relationship to these issues and themes, and they were in the forms of newspaper and magazine articles; short stories; visual materials like commercial advertisements, pictures, posters, album covers; audio materials like CDs and cassettes along with accompanying written texts of song; and audio-visual materials like videos and movie clips.

Finally, we decided on appropriate models in the materials that allowed us to illustrate rhetorical correspondences to other texts of edited English and discussed and agreed on the instructional strategies to be used. The instructional strategies were focused on ways to motivate students to go beyond discussion about topics and issues of interest to engaging in sustained writing about them.

These strategies began with personalized writing tasks at the outset that allowed students to build out of their immediate, personal experiences, but moved from personal writing (narrative/descriptive) to analytic/persuasive and eventually to research and writing from sources. Our most basic strategy was to try to increase the students' writing competence by using these curriculum materials to motivate them to significantly increase their writing output.

Data Collection and Writing Assessment

The central corpus of data was from continual class observations by the two graduate student research assistants and the project director, and from the initial and final writing prompts. In conjunction with requests from the focal teachers, it was decided to initiate the actual intervention in the second semester rather than the first semester of the 1994-1995 academic year as we had originally planned. The intervention culminated with the administering of our second writing prompt, and this also marked the end of our formal data collection at the two school sites.

The project took place in two classrooms at each school for two days a week for the 12 week duration of the intervention. All four classes of students were juniors in high school. Each of the two classes at both schools were audio taped during the days that the teachers were utilizing our project materials and focus. We also took extensive field notes and did a number of interviews with both teachers and selected students. Additionally, there were regular meetings with the two focal teachers throughout the project, and notes were kept on the evolving perceptions of the teachers. Several of these meeting were also audiotaped. A final source of data was the students' writing journals which were kept in order for them to informally respond to their experiences with the project's materials and focus.

The primary assessment instrument for the writing was the pre-test and post-test prompts. For the pre-test, parallel prompts were administered to each class. Members of each class were randomly given either one or the other of the two prompts. The reverse prompt to the one each class member ended up with in the pre-test was administered in the post-test for each student. For both writing experiences the students in all classes were orally given exactly the same directions and the same amount of time to write an argumentative essay on the topic that appeared at the top of the sheet that they were given. The directions were also written out for the students to be able to refer to.

We originally had planned to score the essays holistically. However, as a result of consultation with Professor Dick Hayes during the June 1993 National Advisory Board Meeting, we decided to develop a different method of evaluating the essays than we had originally conceived. Hayes and Schriver's project results revealed that achieving reliability with trained scorers did not indicate reliability in measuring student performance from one writing to the next because of a lack of stability of student performance.
Consequently, rather than focusing on reliability between our two scorers, we had them make their individual determinations of which of the two prompts were better for each student without the scorers knowing which of the prompts was the pre-test and which was the post-test. Essentially we wanted to see if the scorers working independently and with no knowledge of which essay was written at the beginning or the end of the intervention would be able to determine significant differences in the quality of the two essays. Naturally, we hoped that the majority of essays in response to the post-test would also end up being the ones which scorers determined to have significantly higher quality than the pre-test essays. We also looked for patterns in the scorers' comments as to why they made the determinations they did regarding each set of essays.

FINDINGS

The findings from the scorers' comparisons of the two writing prompts will be presented first, followed by additional findings from the over all study. The two parallel prompt questions for both the pre-test and the post-test argumentative essays were:

1. What do you think about people who are not African American becoming rap artists?
2. What do you think about people who are not African American using hip hop language and dressing in hip hop styles?

Below are charts of the findings of the scorers for both high schools:

BERKELEY HIGH SCHOOL

Scorer 1	Prompt 1 Better	Prompt 2 Better	Can't Tell
Period 3	4	8	0
Period 4	8	9	0
Scorer 2			
Period 3	3	9	0
Period 4	6	9	2

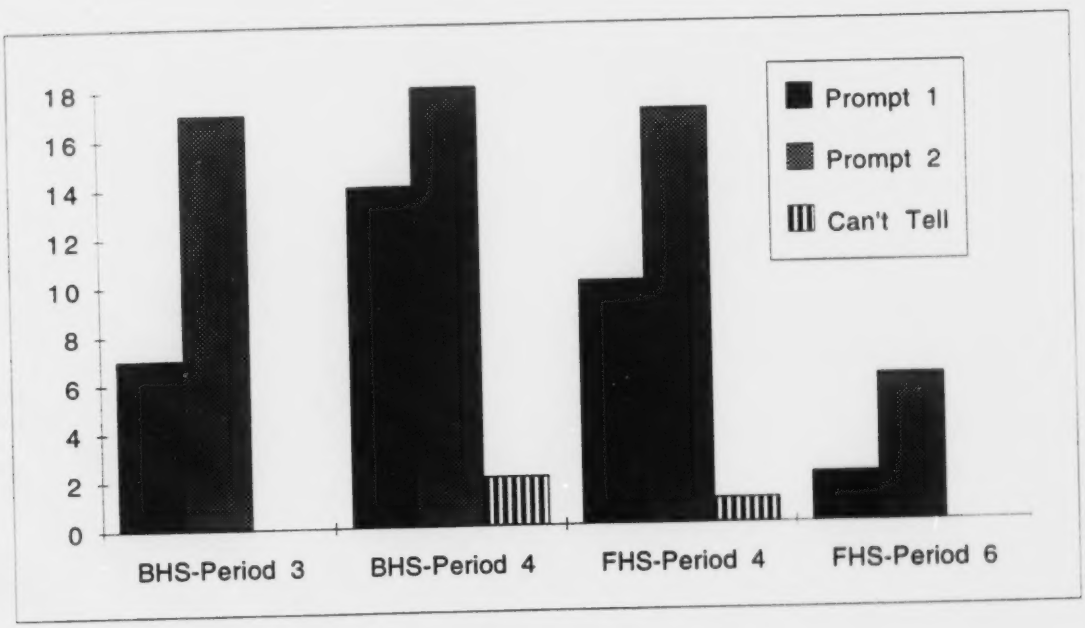
FREMONT HIGH SCHOOL

Scorer 1	Prompt 1 Better	Prompt 2 Better	Can't Tell
Period 4	6	8	0
Period 6	1	3	0
Scorer 2			
Period 4	4	9	1
Period 6	1	3	0

The combined numbers for prompt 1, prompt 2, and the "can't tell" category for each period represent the number of matches that we had for students who were present for both the pre-test and the post-test and are, therefore, less than the total number of students in each class. For half of the classes tested (specifically 3rd period scores for Berkeley high and one of the 2nd period scores for Fremont high) scorers rated more than twice as many prompt 2 essays as being better than prompt 1 essays in contrast to the reverse case. The same could be said for both scorers' ratings of period 6 at Fremont, but there were only four students who were present for both essays. By the time of the intervention in the school year, this particular class at Fremont had dwindled down to approximately 7 students in regular attendance.

In three of the eight ratings, however, the scorers found almost as many cases as not where they felt prompt 1 was actually better than prompt 2 (both ratings of period 4 at Berkeley and one rating of period 4 at Fremont). These ratings in conjunction with several other factors made it difficult to conclude that the intervention did, in fact, have a significant impact specifically on the writing development of many of the students. One of these other factors was the kind of comments that the scorers made on the papers that they rated. Though they generally noted better papers based on determinations of features like greater coherency of the argument, greater development of the argument, or a more persuasive argument, there were also a number of cases where they could only comment that one was "better by a little" or that both papers were very similar though one was a little clearer or a little more on topic. Another way of looking at how close some of these essays were to call was to compare specifically which students were behind the composite numbers from the scorers. Using the one period and prompt where both scorers had the same number as an example (prompt 2 of period 4 at Berkeley high) we see by comparison of the names of the

actual students [Attachments 1 and 2] that only five of both scorers' nine students, or just above half, were the same students. Yet, it was still quite interesting to see that collectively, the scorers definitely found more of the writing at the end of the intervention to be better in discernible ways for the students overall by a margin of almost 2 to 1 (58 to 33) as depicted below.



Though its difficult to conclude from the results of the writing prompts that the intervention had a significant impact specifically on the writing development of the focal students in the project, there were a number of other findings that were important. First, many students were found to have significant competence in both the oral and written production of rap texts. Second, we did find interesting correspondences between some rap texts and other literate texts that students must engage in schools. Third, we found that when the curriculum contained materials that more authentically represented

these students' cultural experiences, it did help to transform their apathy toward writing and learning in school. The focal teachers continually reported that students who had a history of apathy and minimal participation in the classroom came alive when presented with the intervention curriculum . They contributed to class discussion and began doing more class work including homework. These findings will be addressed in more detail in the following section of discussion and analysis. Some additional problems that this intervention posed will also be addressed.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

One of the most productive aspects of the intervention for both the teachers and the students were the "discoveries" of connections between some rap texts and other literate texts. In our explorations of rap text, one thing that became apparent was that many of the most commercially successful rap artists are highly proficient in (and perform much of their music in) language that is very close to edited English. Since much of their work is available in textual transcriptions inside the CDs as well as in some books that have been published to present the texts of the popular songs and videos, our intervention was able to demonstrate ways that some of these texts could be used jointly as models for and motivation to students in learning to write and think critically. One example from the intervention, a rap song titled "I Used to Love H.E.R." by a group called Common Sense will be used to illustrate some of the oral/text, experience/text, and curriculum/text links that were possible along with some of the ways that these links can be problematic.

"I Used to Love H.E.R." described the evolution of rap music by personifying it as the experiences of a young girl growing into adulthood. The theme of the song was revealed in the changing relationship of the lead singer to

this maturing girl. "I met this girl when I was ten years old, and what I loved most, she had so much soul." He described how fresh she was when she first started out on the East Coast, when she was free in the parks, "when she was underground, original, pure, untampered, a down sista. Boy, I tell ya, I miss her." But she changed when "she broke to the West Coast." And though she was already creative, "once the man got to her, he altered her native. Told her if she got an energetic gimmick then she could make money, and she did it like a dummy. Now I see her in commercials, she's universal. She used to only swing it with the inner city circle." The last section of the song chronicled the extent to which she has been slammed and taken to the sewer and qualified the singer's lament for why he used to love her.

We showed the short video of "I Used to Love H.E.R.," and used it as an lyrical/visual text to prompt discussion. The students amazed us and their teachers with their ability to explicate rhetorical strategies and thematic considerations. They demonstrated a clear understanding of personification and other metaphorical features of in this text, and they provided in-depth discussion and analysis of the thematic features. They, in fact, had more sophisticated perceptions and more information about some of the provocative issues that the text raised like concerns about "studio gangsters" (rappers whose only real experience with violence and street life is when they sing about it in the music studios) and the commodification of rap music and styles than any of the members of our teacher/researcher group. The video had no curse words in it, but the students gave extended critiques to social, political, and racial implications of the use of words like "nigga" as well as other issues like drug use, violence, the denigration of women, along with questions of the nature of creativity and cultural authenticity that the song raised. The students were able to continue and extent this line of critique when we later provided the written

text of the song, and we were also able to demonstrate how the written text of the song was highly consistent with conventions of edited English.

Since the discussions (and the video itself) had addressed the commodification of rap to sell everything from Coke to cars, we video-taped several soft drink commercials which were permeated with rap music and images and used them in the classes to extend the discussions. They also became a prompt for writing when the students decided they wanted to script and produce their own commercials. This led to considerations of persuasive writing which the students were eager to learn more about in order to incorporate them into their texts. The classes were divided into groups of five or six students to complete and critique each others writing and to negotiate one script per group for video production. Then they worked together to actually direct, act in, and video tape their commercials. After each group shared their production with the rest of the class, each student wrote critiques of each of the commercials that were presented. Our focal teachers noted that their students' work and writing for this part of the intervention was perhaps the most inspired period of learning for the students during the entire school year. They also noted how some students who had only done marginal work in the class during the rest of the school year, had come alive and worked hard on their scripts, and had even taken leadership roles in their group work.

Interestingly, I eventually realized that almost every student production had an implicit message that what was being sold was needed to resolve or compensate for some deficiency that females specifically were perceived to have. At first I thought this might merely be a coincidence, but when I discussed it with the other members of our teacher/researcher team, they all agreed that this outcome was too consistent for it to merely be coincidental. They were concerned that the messages and images from rap culture (and American culture

at large) that denigrated women had become so pervasive that the students might be reproducing them unconsciously and unquestioningly. They were equally concerned that they as women had not initially seen or questioned this trend in the students' productions. We decided that even the video "I Used to Love H.E.R.," which had been chosen because it chronicled the way rap's pristine form had been transformed (raped and prostituted) by commercial interest and other societal forces, also contributed through its personification to a characterization of women as powerless, and easily corrupted, and in need of a male -- in this case the lead singer -- to save her from her frailties.

We later tried to address this problem in class discussions with the students. Since we had had earlier discussions about the negative characterizations of females that often occur in rap music, students were somewhat sensitive to this issue. Yet, they were surprised that they had unconsciously reproduced similar negative characterizations of their own. We elaborated with examples of how African Americans as a race are often portrayed negatively in the mass media and explored some of the ways that these images are sometimes internalized and revealed in self deprecating attitudes and/or self destructive behaviors. But this occurrance also made our teacher/researcher team more aware of how utilizing rap lyrical, visual, and written texts to facilitate the production of student writing could also potentially contribute to the reproduction of problematic cultural perceptions.

A couple of closing findings had to do with a kind of unforeseen challenge to our premise that we could build on the lived experiences of students in schools. This premise is predicated on the notion that we can actually incorporate their authentic experiences into classrooms. This study also revealed how this notion gets complicated in various ways for research, for teaching, and for student writing. One way it gets complicated is around an inter-generational

dimension that revealed itself in the actual context of teaching during the curricular intervention.

Though both focal teachers completely supported the project and had already experimented with rap music in their curriculums, one who had taught high school for about six years ended up being much more comfortable presenting and leading activities that utilized the curricular materials we had jointly developed. The other focal teacher felt that she not being as successful with students who currently occupied her classes. She initially saw the intervention as a way to breathe more life into her classroom as the semester wound down toward the end of the school year. Yet, unlike the newer teacher, the more experienced teacher was not as comfortable presenting and leading activities based on our curricular materials, and she began to feel that her students did not really accept her teaching them about rap music and culture. Essentially, she sensed that her students were resisting being taught about "their" lived experiences by someone they considered to be outside of those experiences. Very little research addresses teaching situations where the students are "authorities" and may know significantly more about the topic than their teachers.

A final related finding that emerged in conjunction with situating these materials in the curriculum was tied to the mutability of student interests in them. During the time it took to go through the process for developing these materials into curricular texts, many had already become passé in the minds and lives of the students for whom they had been prepared. But, in attempting to link curricular texts to students' lived experiences, we had not anticipated nor could we fully compensate for the ephemeral shelf life of texts we had hoped would be authentic representations.

CONCLUSION

This project tried to foray beyond traditional structural and cultural borders and trace inroads in curriculum and instruction that might authentically engage students. In becoming ethnographers of student experiences with rap music and in hip-hop culture, we not only found some points of connection that could be made for learning in schools, but we also learned a bit more about where points of connection could be made between youths and adults. We routinely ask students to study things we have seen to be important in the adult world, but our success with them also depends on our efforts to understand things they have deemed to be important in theirs.

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ATTACHMENT 1

Reader 1 Comparisons of Writing Prompts 1 and 2 for Mahiri Project: African American & Youth Culture: Bridge to Writing Development

Findings:

Berkeley High School

3rd period

PROMPT 1 Better: 4
Rosa Santiago, Victoria Harris, Louis Bryson, Zuziwani Savannah

PROMPT 2 Better: 8
Heaven Davis, Shannon Harrison, Justin Reid, Nakia George, Jovan Burton, Tameka Davis, Maurice Rideau, Vernon Gray

4th period

PROMPT 1 Better: 8
Nataniya Wilson, William Smith, Bernard Williams, Joycelyn Simon, Jerome McIntosh, Leticia Huerta, Ashanta Woods, James Beaver

PROMPT 2 Better: 9
Tyra Collins, Craig Jones, Cecilia Watson, Geroge Taylor, Ruben Christouale, Tejuanya Tolbert, LaKennedy Hardware, Bruce Evans, Ivory Balshy

Fremont High School

4th period

PROMPT 1 Better: 6
Wykhiua Oliver, Shanwnte Scott, Alma Maldonado, Adriana Enriquez, Kennyatta Brown, Nathan Wallace

PROMPT 2 Better: 8
Michael Butler, Charmaine Paris,, Leticia Heredia, Shuntee Carter, Earnest Caldwell, Derika Hayes, Janice Maile, Keneshia Willis

6th period

PROMPT 1 Better: 1
Keleigh Ento

PROMPT 2 Better: 3
Regina LeBlance, Yamin Ayseh, Brian Lozano

ATTACHMENT 2

Reader 2 Comparisons of Writing Prompts 1 and 2 for Mahiri Project: African American & Youth Culture: Bridge to Writing Development

Findings:

Berkeley High School

3rd period

PROMPT 1: Better 3
Jovan Burton, Victoria Harris, Louis Bryson,

PROMPT 2: Better 9
Justin Reid, Rosa Santiago, Shannon Harris, Maurice Rideau, Vernon Gray, Zuziwani Savannah, Tameka Davis, Nakia George, Heaven Davis

4th period

PROMPT 1 Better: 6
Bernard Williams, Craig Jones, George Taylor, William Smith, Leticia Huerta, Ashanta Woods

CAN'T TELL (2):
Tyra Collin, Ivory Balshy

PROMPT 2 Better: 9
Teuanya Tolbert, Rugen Chistouale, Nataniyah Wilson, Cecilia Watson, LaKennedy Hardware, Jerome McIntosh, James Beaver, Jocelyn Simon, Bruce Evans

Fremont High School

4th period
PROMPT 1 Better: 4
Derika Hayes, Earnest Caldwell, Shuntee Carter, Adriana Enriquez

CAN'T TELL (1):
Leticia Heredia

PROMPT 2 Better: 9
Alma Maldonado, Michael Butler Kenishia Wills, Nathan Wallace, Shawnte Scott, Janice Maile, Kenyatta Brown, Charmaine Paris, Wykhiua Oliver,

6th Period
PROMPT 1 Better: 1
Yamin Ayesh

PROMPT 2 Better: 3
Keleigh Ento, Regina LeBlanc, Brian Ento